

Mormonism

Mormonism is a nickname applied to the beliefs of the members of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-Day Saints.

Worldwide membership is estimated at over 13.5 million making Mormonism the strongest cult in the Western world. It is strongly missionary-orientated, employing more than 60,000 young men as missionaries and recruiting approximately 250,000 converts each year.

Their headquarters are in the state of Utah in the United States. Brigham Young, successor to their founder, supervised the famous trek of Mormons to Utah in 1847, where they built Salt Lake City.

How It Began

The movement began with Joseph Smith (1805-1844). In 1820, at the age of 14, he received a vision in which, he claims, God the Father and the Son appeared, forbidding him to join any Christian denomination. The reason given him was God's displeasure with their beliefs. As a result he believed that God had called him to be His special prophet to the world.

Three years later he claimed to have experienced an even more impressive vision in which, he said, an angel named Moroni told him that details of the early history of America and a fuller revelation of the gospel had been written in ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics on gold plates and hidden under the hill Cumorah. Although he wanted to see these plates immediately, he was told in another appearance by Moroni that he would have to wait four years before retrieving them. Exactly four years later he returned to the place, obtained the plates and 'spectacles', or rather two crystals, by means of which he says he was able to translate the hieroglyphics.

Scholars deny the existence of this ancient language and the supposed translation includes several errors in historical detail. Conveniently for the Mormons, the alleged gold plates disappeared before the publication of the translation, called The Book of Mormon.

Smith and another five friends established the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints at Fayette in New York State. Although the movement grew, it was also exposed to considerable ridicule and persecution, and Smith was compelled to move to a number of different places, including Kirkland in Ohio, Missouri, and then Illinois, where in 1844 he was shot dead after being arrested and imprisoned for alleged immorality and dishonesty.

Eight of Smith's seventeen wives had died before him. He had as many as fifty-six children. Almost overnight he became a hero and under his successor, Brigham Young, who had even more wives than Smith (twenty-five) the movement flourished.

God

Mormons identify God with Adam. They believe that He was once a mortal but progressed to become an exalted being. There are many such gods. The Trinity for them comprises three separate individuals who are one in purpose but physically distinct from each other.

Mormons regard the Holy Spirit in impersonal terms, frequently refer ring to him as 'it', and describing him as a substance. They deny his indispensable work in applying redemption to sinners and reject the notion of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in believers. Only the Mormon priesthood can confer the Holy Spirit on people through the laying on of hands.

Man

Misusing the words of Satan to Eve, "You will be like God," Mormons promise the faithful that they will be gods. Every man is therefore a potential god. All humans and spirits (including

Christ and Satan) have previously existed as spirits with God from eternity. At their physical birth they were given bodies.

Adam's sin, they say, proved to be a great blessing to mankind for, apart from it, he would neither have known good and evil nor had a posterity. Man is not a sinner by nature.

Man's Problem

Man's life on earth is a time of probation which determines his status and destiny after the resurrection.

The Solution to the Problem

Since they regard man as being basically good and God as no more than an exalted man, Mormons see no great problem in attaining salvation. There was no need for Jesus to satisfy the justice of God on our behalf. They reject the biblical doctrine of justification by faith alone and advocate faith plus works and baptism for salvation. A good life, the keeping of rules and baptism by immersion administered only by Mormons guarantee salvation.

From the age of eight upwards, baptism can wash away sins but without total immersion there is no pardon. On the basis of 1 Corinthians 15:29, people are encouraged to be baptized by proxy on behalf of dead relatives and friends.¹

The Final Outcome

At death the spiritual body separates from the physical one and returns to the spirit world. Mormons have a materialistic view of the 'celestial' glory that awaits them. As gods themselves each will rule his own planet with his family and have children there, as God did on earth. That is the blessing for which all mortals strive.

Two other outcomes are possible. Non-Mormons will be damned. Those who have lived honourable lives but were not "valiant in the testimony of Jesus" enter a lesser degree of glory as angels.

How Do We Know These Things Are True?

Revelation, for Mormons, is continuous. They believe that the Book of Mormon² and the Bible have equal authority. They will misuse Ezekiel 37:15 – 17 to prove it, suggesting that the two sticks referred represent the Bible and the Book of Mormon. According to them, these two become the one stick that represents God's Word.³ In practice they neglect the Bible in preference for Smith's writings.

The book of Mormon contains the story of lost Israelites who migrated to America in the sixth century BC but were killed in battle in 428AD. Before their destruction the angel Mormon, father of Moroni, hid the golden plates that were discovered by Smith in 1827.

Although the Mormon Church was founded on the basis of the Book of Mormon, there exists a wide discrepancy between the book's teaching and that of contemporary Mormons; few Mormon leaders or scholars today believe in all of its teaching.

1 There are many different interpretations of this verse, but the following should be noted:

- In this chapter Paul is discussing the resurrection of the dead, not baptism.
- The verse does not say that baptism for the dead was either practised by the Corinthian church or acknowledged by them as a Christian rite.
- Nevertheless baptism for the dead was something they knew about, otherwise Paul could not have referred to it.
- It is likely that Paul, intent on developing the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead, was prepared to even appeal to this pagan practice that assumes the resurrection of the dead.
- In no way does Paul advocate baptism by proxy for the dead.
- In interpreting the Bible we should always interpret difficult passages by the clear teaching of other passages.

2 In 1982 the Book of Mormon was renamed "The Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ" reflecting the belief that the Mormon Church is a Christian Church.

3 Verses 18 – 22 explain clearly that the sticks represent the tribes of Israel and Judah who together form one people.

For example, the Book of Mormon teaches that there is only one God and that he is an unchangeable spirit (Alma 11:26-3 1; II Nephi 3 1:21; Mormon 9:9-11, 19; Moroni 7:22; 8:18), However, contemporary Mormons teach that three separate gods rule our planet. They also teach that all married Mormon males will themselves become gods. Secondly, their book insists upon the necessity of the new birth (Mosiah 27:24- 28; Alma 5:14), but today the necessity of water baptism is stressed as a precondition of salvation and the new birth. Thirdly, the Book of Mormon teaches eternal glory or punishment, with no second chance of salvation beyond the grave (III Nephi 27:11-17; Mosiah 3:24-27; II Nephi 28:22, 23; Alma 34:32-35), but we are now told by Mormons that almost everyone will enjoy some degree of glory and that proxy baptisms can release those people who go to the 'prison house' after death. Despite this inconsistency, Mormons try hard to commend their book as an authentic and final revelation from God.

In addition to the Book of Mormon and the Bible, Mormons revere "Doctrines of the Covenant" and "The Pearl of Great Price," two works penned by Joseph Smith.

Mormon Teaching About Christ

Mormons claim that Jesus was a god and that like all humans He previously existed as a spirit. In addition they say He was the brother of the devil and a son of Adam. He was neither unique nor was his birth supernatural. They regard Jesus as a polygamist who married both Mary and Martha at Cana of Galilee.

Although it preceded others, Jesus resurrection was in no way unique and was completely unrelated to our justification. Every man who is eventually made perfect and raised from the dead will become like the Father and Son in every respect. Their claim that the risen Lord visited America in 34AD has no historical support and is at variance with the New Testament.

Distinctive Practices

The Mormon Church takes tithing seriously and provides for its poorer members making unemployment or social security payments by the government unnecessary. It encourages responsible involvement in education, family and community life. The work of Mormon missionaries is generously supported and in key areas expensive and elaborate temples are built as centres of recreation, culture and religion.

Unmarried people and couples whose marriages have not been 'sealed' in a Mormon temple can only become angels after death. Those whose marriages have been "sealed" for eternity may become gods and their "celestial marriages" will last beyond death. Women must participate in "celestial marriage" in order to reach the celestial kingdom. A man can seal several marriages for heaven — a practice that since 1890 has replaced polygyny.⁴

Divisions within Mormonism

Not all of Smith's followers were happy with Brigham Young's credentials. One group, the 'Josephites', insisted that Smith's successor should be his son, so they withdrew, renaming themselves the Re-organized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, and established their headquarters in Missouri. Many other groups splintered off from the main stream of Mormons, and most of them are still active today. Indeed Mormonism has at least fifty denominations. The most powerful, however, is the party of those who followed Young and it is their teaching that we have considered.

Questions for Discussion

1. How would you respond to a Mormon who claims that the Bible and the Book of Mormon are equally the Word of God?
2. How would you demonstrate to a Mormon his need of salvation?

⁴ Polygyny persists only among splinter groups.

Articles Of Faith

1. We believe in God, the Eternal Father, and in His Son, Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Ghost.
2. We believe that men will be punished for their own sins, and not for Adam's transgression.
3. We believe that through the Atonement of Christ, all mankind may be saved, by obedience to the laws and ordinances of the Gospel.
4. We believe that the first principles and ordinances of the Gospel are: first, Faith in the Lord Jesus Christ: second, Repentance: third, Baptism by immersion for the remission of sins: fourth, laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost.
5. We believe that a man must be called of God, by prophecy and by the laying on of hands by those who are in authority, to preach the Gospel and administer in the ordinances thereof.
6. We believe in the same organization that existed in the Primitive Church, namely, apostles, prophets, pastors, teachers, evangelists, and so forth.
7. We believe in the gift of tongues, prophecy, revelation, visions, healing, interpretation of tongues and so forth.
8. We believe the Bible to be the word of God as far as it is translated correctly: we also believe the Book of Mormon to be the word of God.
9. We believe all that God has revealed, all that He does now reveal, and we believe that He will yet reveal many great and important things pertaining to the Kingdom of God.
10. We believe in the literal gathering of Israel and in the restoration of the Ten Tribes; that Zion (the New Jerusalem) will be built on the American continent; that Christ will reign personally on the earth; and that the earth will be renewed and receive its paradisiacal glory.
11. We claim the privilege of worshipping Almighty God according to the dictates of our own conscience, and allow all men the same privilege, let them worship how, where or what they may.
12. We believe in being subject to kings, presidents, rulers and magistrates in obeying' honouring and sustaining the law.
13. We believe in being honest, true, chaste, benevolent, virtuous and in doing good to all men; indeed, we may say that we follow the admonition of Paul — We believe all things' we hope all things, we have endured many things and hope to be able to endure all things. If there is any thing virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy we seek after these things.